

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Corrections measures interest in offender education program

The Montana Department of Corrections is seeking information with which to redesign the education and vocational programs offered offenders in prisons and prerelease centers across the state.

The agency issued a request for information (RFI) Monday intended to measure the interest of Montana's community colleges, tribal colleges, universities and schools of technology in providing services to inmates. The request also seeks input from higher education professionals on the federally funded program's design.

Significant changes in federal program requirements adopted by Congress through amendments to the Higher Education Act prompted the department to review its education program from a different perspective. Congressional changes limited eligible course work, increased tuition limits, and expanded the definition of eligible inmate. This led to a department assessment of the program, as well as recommendations to incorporate evidence-based practices in its redesign.

National research from the Urban Institute indicates that offenders employed in the first year following their release from prison are half as likely to commit crimes as compared to unemployed offenders. The research also showed that offenders earning at least \$10 an hour have the lowest rates of recidivism at 8 percent a year after release. In addition, those participating in job-training programs while incarcerated are more likely to be employed upon release.

"Congress understands the value of vocational training and education and how it impacts public safety," said Donci Bardash, the department's federal grants coordinator. "For this reason, they have provided funding to each state to support post-secondary education through the Higher Education Act."

The department receives approximately \$70,000 each year in federal funds that may be used to help young offenders access education and training from qualifying post-secondary institutions. According to federal regulations, participating offenders must be age 35 or younger, have a high school diploma or GED, and be eligible for release with seven years. Sexual and violent offenders are excluded from the program.

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Historically, the department has used these funds for an assortment of programs including distance learning through Ohio University. Offenders could enroll in courses ranging from law to creative writing with no limitations, and the program did not incorporate evidence-based practices. A life skills component was provided by Montana State University-Billings.

The department's goal is to develop one consolidated educational program rooted in evidence-based practices. Narrowing the courses of study to correspond with the local labor market will increase a participating offenders' ability to secure work upon return to the community. Additionally, this consolidation would decrease the administrative work load, shifting resources to screening and recruiting offenders.

"Our department values the extraordinary resource Montana has in its university system and tribal colleges, and hopes to tap that expertise to benefit offenders and the society that they return to," Bardash said. "It's important to highlight that their services help address public safety concerns in every Montana community by helping individuals – including offenders – become work-ready."

Responses to the request will be accepted through Jan. 13, 2009. A technical assistance call is scheduled for Jan. 6. More than 30 schools qualify for the program. The RFI can be found online at www.cor.mt.gov.

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